4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

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782
789
[402]
[291]

FIGURE 1

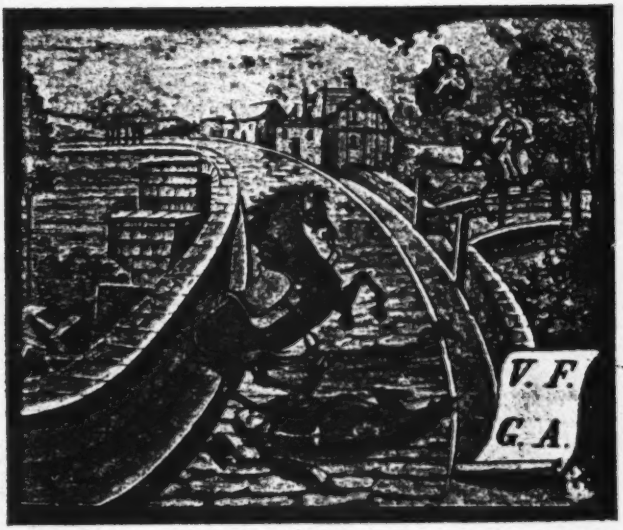

FIGURE 2

[facing P. 25]
1/1 [captions appear on p. 29 - An.]

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

tuaries that remains particularly rich in painted 'ex-votos' is the church in the Tal Herba district (Birkirkara) erected in 1640 and dedicated to the Birth of the Holy Virgin. These panels are hung up, one above the other, almost up to the ceiling so that the following description written almost one hundred years ago still applies with regard to this particular church: 'On the walls one sees a considerable number of small paintings representing the favours received through the intercession of the Holy Virgin by those devotees who had recourse to her in their calamities' (Ferres 1866, p. 322). As far as could be ascertained the latest painting in this church is dated 1944.

On the whole these pictures are the work of self-taught anonymous folk who never regarded themselves as artists but only as humble craftsmen. In fact their productions often ignore the rules of perspective while the colours and the shading are poor; but in viewing them one must take account of the fact that they were not intended to be decorative pieces. They were simply meant to be pictorial records of the occurrence of a medical emergency that was thought to be beyond human control and which ended happily in an extraordinary manner through a supernatural act. Indeed these pictures portray the moment in which the physician confesses that there is nothing that medical art and science can do to save the patient's life and the instant in which the Divine intervention occurs. Thus we behold the Holy Mary relieving a choking girl or rescuing a pedestrian from being crushed by the wheel of a carriage or see Our Lady stopping a run-away horse and saving its rider from harm (Plate 2, Fig. 2); or else softening the impact of the fall from a height of a stone-mason so that he reaches the ground uninjured; or sparing the life of a farmer from an enraged beast (Plate 2, Fig. 1). In this task of graphically reproducing an event, these paintings succeed very well.

OTHER VOTIVE OFFERINGS

Other things offered for medical reasons consist of: (i) Surgical and orthopaedic appliances such as crutches, plaster jackets, leather corsets, iron splints, metal sutures, etc. (ii) Foreign bodies removed from organs such as stones from the kidneys, needles from fingers, hair-clips from the throat, swallowed thimble, etc. (iii) Babies' dresses, some of them embroidered with gold thread, are a characteristic feature of the Mellieha sanctuary. This custom of offering the child's clothing as a token for recovery from illness prevailed also in connexion with the tomb of the Holy Hermit Kurraw at the Qala sanctuary in Gozo. The grateful mothers of sick children used to deposit the clothing of their offspring on the hermit's grave as a sign that the disease had been transferred from the children's bodies on to their clothing (Vella Haber 1946, p. 14). Babies' dresses are also offered in thanksgiving for an uneventful delivery and the birth of a normal infant. (iv) Wax tapers, decorated torches and bottles of olive oil for lighting the sanctuary lamp. (v) Sums of money. (vi) Jewellery is the most common 'ex-voto' to be seen to-day in Maltese churches. There are gold necklaces, finger-rings, brooches and other items of personal adornment. Apart from their intrinsic value, most of these gold ornaments represent the most prized possessions which the votary had to offer because they formed the most substantial part of a woman's dowry. To give an idea of the quantity of these valuable articles deposited in one single shrine during a month's time, here is a list, chosen at random from a religious periodical published in 1894: 'Sixteen gold rings, one pair of gold ear-rings with diamonds, two silver bracelets, a gold watch and a

[see plate II, facing p. 25.-Ed.]

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

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CAPTIONS TO PLATES

1

PLATE I

Fig. 1. Silver votive offerings representing various parts of the body. The model between the trunk and the ear is a stylized form of the female breasts. (By courtesy of the Director of the National Museum, Valletta. Photograph by Jos. Spiteri.)

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Fig. 2. This leg of baked clay is from the Roman ruins at Ras-ir-Raheb to the north west of Bahria, Malta. (By courtesy of the Director of the National Museum, Valletta. Photograph by Jos. Spiteri.)

Fig. 3. Bronze dies of liver and lower limb used by Maltese silver smiths for the manufacture of the silver 'ex-votos'. Scale in centimetres and inches. (By courtesy of the Director of the National Museum, Valletta. Photograph by Jos. Spiteri.)

PLATE II

Fig. 1. The picture tells the story so clearly that no inscription is attached to it. Note the Maltese type of windmill and the costumes of the peasants still in use during the last century. Tal Hlas Church, Qormi. (Photograph by Jos. Spiteri.)

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Fig. 2. The landscape is not Maltese. Presumably this 'ex-voto' was offered by a foreigner or else the donor was a Maltese who met with a riding accident abroad. The letters V.F.G.A. stand for 'Votum Fecit Gratiam Accepit' (A vow was made and a favour received). Tal Mirakli Church, Lija, Malta. (Photograph by Captain C. Zammit, F.S.A.)

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1 [plate I will be found facing p. 24; plate II faces p. 25.– Ed.]

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

584 ness of the connection, without at all consulting the inclinations of their children.

[675] [431] [583] The articles of the contract having been settled, and the marriage portion agreed upon, the young man sent his intended bride a present consisting of a certain fish ornamented with garlands of ribband, with a ring or some costly jewel in its mouth.

The first interview was then fixed to take place in presence of the parents and their kinsfolk, best friends, and neighbours, who were regaled with sweetmeats and other refreshments.

[989] Before this meeting took place, the mothers of the two young people retired either into an arbour in the garden or some separate apartment, where they prepared a mixture of aniseed, aromatic plants, salt, and honey

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

with which they rubbed the bride's lips, with the idea of rendering her affable and prudent. She was then conducted into the room where her future husband awaited her arrival, who presented her with a ring on which was engraved two hands united—the emblem of mutual faith—together with bracelets, necklaces and a gold chain —she presenting him in return with a handkerchief trimmed with lace and bows of ribbon.

This ceremony is called "il chelma" which means the engagement.

On the morning of the wedding-day the most honoured personage among the husband's relations threw a fine white veil over the bride's head—who wore a brocade or velvet dress, in which the other relations made certain rents for the purpose of affixing small golden shells.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

LIGHT OMENS

If a woman wishes that either her husband or her son return from abroad, she is to light a lamp and leave it behind the entrance door. If the party expected does not return on the following morning, she is to light the lamp again on the following night and keep doing so until at last she sees her dear one entering the house. 789 373

BALSAM

Those among the Maltese who wish to have a *balsam* that possesses the property of healing all kinds of wounds, take an egg that has been laid on the 25th of March, Lady Day, hide it within a cupboard or on a shelf, in a dark place, and at the end of a year they begin to use it as a sovereign and unfailing remedy. 755

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
EZ6 Malta EZ6

was anciently used to represent the tying of Life with Spirit. 585
Its association with the "True Lovers' Knot" of our grand- 801
mothers is obvious. There is Biblical authority, too, for the 171
separation of husband from wife, in the incident between Tobias and the Angel Raphael.

Tobias (or Tobit) is about to be wedded to the maiden whose former seven husbands have been slain on the bridal night by an evil spirit. The angel says, "For they who in such manner receive matrimony as to shut out God from themselves to their lust, as the horse and mule, which they have not understanding. Over them the devil hath power. . . . Keep thyself continent from her. . . ."[1]

So far the marriage customs which remain extant—only one or two generations separate Zeppu and Gretz from the more primitive customs. Here is what a Maltese writer has 584
to say of marriages in the not very distant past:

> "The articles of the contract having been settled, and the marriage portion agreed upon, the young man sent his intended bride a present consisting of a certain fish ornamented with garlands of ribband, with a ring or some costly jewel in its mouth.
>
> The first interview was then fixed to take place in presence of the parents and their kinsfolk, best friends, and neighbours, who were regaled with sweetmeats and other refreshments.
>
> Before this meeting took place, the mothers of the two [789] •
> young people retired either into an arbour in the garden or some separate apartment, where they prepared a mixture of aniseed, aromatic plants, salt, and honey with which they rubbed the bride's lips, with the idea of rendering her affable and prudent. She was then con- [301]
> ducted into the room where her future husband awaited

[1] *Tobias*, VI, 17–18.

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
EZ6 Malta EZ6

174 584 825 which conferred on him "such Wisdom, Prowess, and good fortune . . . that Fame and Prosperity always attended him thereafter." Tennyson, describing his mystic Lady of the Lake, has:

> And o'er her breast floated the Sacred Fish.

The Saviour Himself was symbolized by the early Christians as a fish. Julius Africanus, an early Christian writer, said of Christ that He was the Great Fish, caught by the Hook of God, whose flesh nourishes the whole world.[1]

This bridal fish, then, may be in some sense a sacramental offering as well as a mere symbol.

584 789 828 The anointing of the bride's lips is yet another custom which, like the miniature "garden inclosed" of the marriageable girl, recalls the Canticle of Canticles:

> Thy lips my spouse are as a dropping honeycomb, honey and milk are under thy tongue. . . .[2]

585 174 The whole of this marriage ceremony is reminiscent of the old Fertility cults—the cakes, sweetmeats, nuts, grain, all in honour of the fertile Mother whose bountiful Earth is carried in a bowl bearing effigies of the bride and bridegroom whom it is hoped she will bless with her own fecundity and riches.

EVERYDAY HABITS

771 788 Grez, the housewife, will go about her daily tasks carefully following a thousand small rules, most of which have their English parallels. She will never cut a loaf without first making the Sign of the Cross on it with forefinger or knife. If the loaf falls to the ground, she will kiss it by way of asking pardon. She will not sweep her house after sunset for fear of [754] sweeping away good fortune. She will take care not to throw her "combings" out of doors. Should anyone wish her ill it

[1] *The Lost Language of Symbolism.* [2] *Song of Solomon*, IV, ii.